



Orientalism in Turkish Academia: An Observation of the Dynamics of Western-Educated Faculty vs Local

*Türk Akademisinde Oryantalizm: Batı Eğitilmiş Akademisyenler ile Yerel Akademik Kadro
Dinamikleri Üzerine Bir Gözlem*

Abdullah Yarash JURAT ^a

Abstract

This piece explores the phenomenon of Orientalism within Turkish academia, emphasizing the preferential treatment of academics holding Ph. D.s from Western institutions, particularly the US. While existing studies focus on the experiences of Western-origin faculty in Türkiye and the colonial tendency of Western scholarship in the Global South, this research targets the Turkish faculty with Western degrees in Turkish scholarship. The theoretical foundation draws on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and extends to include discussions on coloniality and the geopolitics of knowledge. The observatory findings supported by the existing literature reveal systemic preferences for Western-educated scholars in terms of hiring and promotion, perpetuating inequalities reflective of post-colonial power dynamics in the global academic system.

Keywords: Orientalism, academic colonialism, faculty, Türkiye.

^a Lecturer, Cal Poly Humboldt State University, CA, US., International Studies, Abdullah.jurat@humboldt.edu, ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0493-0331>

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Batılı kurumlarda, özellikle ABD’de doktora yapan akademisyenlere yönelik ayrıcalıklı muameleye vurgu yaparak, Türk akademisindeki Oryantalizm kavramını araştırmaktadır. Mevcut çalışmalar Türkiye’deki Batı kökenli öğretim üyelerinin deneyimlerine ve Küresel Güney’deki Batılı akademisyenliğin sömürgeci eğilimine odaklanırken, bu makale Türk akademisyenliği içindeki Batılı derecelere sahip Türk öğretim üyelerini hedef almaktadır. Çalışmanın teorik temeli, Edward Said’in Oryantalizm kavramını ve sömürgecilik ve bilgi jeopolitiği üzerine tartışmaları içermektedir. Mevcut literatür tarafından desteklenen gözlem bulguları, işe alım ve terfi açısından Batı’da eğitim görmüş akademisyenlere yönelik sistemik tercihleri ortaya koymakta ve küresel akademik sistemdeki sömürge sonrası güç dinamiklerini yansıtan eşitsizlikleri sürdürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oryantalizm, akademik sömürgecilik, akademisyen, Türkiye.

1. Introduction

The historical relationship between Türkiye and the West has been deeply shaped by the power dynamics of Orientalism. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) fundamentally challenged the ways in which the West perceives and represents the East, unveiling a pervasive narrative that reinforces Western dominance. While Said’s work primarily focused on sociopolitical literature, its implications extend into various fields, including academia. In contemporary Turkish academia, I observed a form of academic Orientalism where Ph.D. holders from Western universities are viewed as intellectually superior, echoing the historical power imbalances Said described. Turkish universities, striving for global recognition and higher rankings (Aydinli & Mathews, 2021), often prioritize hiring faculty with Western educational backgrounds, contributing to a hierarchical system that marginalizes local scholars.

Said’s analysis of the Western intellectual tradition underscored how colonialism, imperialism, and European modernity created a discourse in which non-Western societies were seen as backward or undeveloped. In the case of Türkiye, the Ottoman Empire’s

encounter with European modernity in the 19th century introduced a long-lasting tension between Westernization and the preservation of Ottoman identity. During this period, Ottoman reformers believed that the empire's decline could be reversed by adopting Western scientific, legal, and educational models (Zürcher, 2017). Zürcher further highlights that this was the precursor to a much larger process of intellectual transformation, which continued after the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's radical modernization reforms.

This paper critically examines how Said's concept of Orientalism manifests in the Turkish academic context solely based on the author's exposure both in Turkish and American scholarship. Thus, it aims to extend the conversation by exploring the observation of both foreign and Turkish faculty with Western degrees, situating these dynamics within the broader framework of Orientalism and the geopolitics of knowledge (Mignolo, 2002). In doing so, it reveals how academic practices in Türkiye mirror broader global trends, where Western knowledge is often seen as superior and more legitimate (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019).

The dynamics of international academic mobility, particularly regarding faculty with Ph.D. degrees from Western universities, intersect with deeper post-colonial narratives, most notably Said's theory of Orientalism. Within this framework, Western knowledge production often assumes a superior position, casting non-Western cultures, institutions, and intellectual endeavors as subordinate or inferior (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019). This underlying power dynamic has long shaped perceptions in various sectors, including academia. Despite the global expansion of higher education and increased efforts to internationalize, the academic prestige associated with Western institutions continues to carry significant weight in non-Western countries like Türkiye.

Considering the shift in the flow of international academic mobility from the West to the East, the landscape of higher education in Türkiye is increasingly shaped by the presence of Western-educated faculty members. Among related literature on the topic of this research, Seggie and Çalıkoğlu (2023) analyzed the motivations, expectations, and experiences of Western-origin international academics in Türkiye. However, they partially referred in their research findings that,

“Perceived positive professional and socio-cultural opportunities can be attributed to the fact that Western academics are seen as superior and special in the sense that they represent the authoritative knowledge and norms and values of the prestigious [Higher Education] system of the West and are accordingly provided with privileges and resources as a result of their ascribed status with reference to the symbolic capital and supremacy of the West (13).”

The above extract is related to the main argument of this study, which amplifies the oriental mentality. Therefore, this study aims to build upon the existing related literature in the context of Orientalism that primarily focuses on the colonial aspect of Western scholarship (Mignolo, 2002; Stein, 2017; Vavrus & Pekol, 2015).

Curiously, there has been little scholarly focus on how this post-colonial framework operates in the context of Turkish academia. This gap in the literature is noteworthy, as these individuals often embody a dual identity: carrying the intellectual capital of the West while negotiating their positions within a traditionally non-Western academic environment. This study, therefore, aims to explore how Orientalism manifests in the treatment and integration of these Western-educated Turkish and foreign academics within Turkish universities. The study seeks to interrogate the perceived superiority of Western academic credentials and its implications on professional hierarchies and institutional power structures in Turkish universities. Through this lens, I hope to shed light on how post-colonial legacies continue to influence the global flow of knowledge and academic mobility, particularly in a country that straddles both Eastern and Western identities.

2. Edward Said’s Orientalism and Its Theoretical Foundations

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) critiques the way Western scholars and institutions represent the "Orient," primarily the Middle East, but also extending to other non-Western regions. Said argues that Orientalism is not merely an academic field but a powerful structure of knowledge and representation developed to control and dominate non-Western societies (Said, 1978). The core of Said’s argument is that Western powers created the Orient as an “Other”—an exotic, backward entity that required Western intervention and knowledge to be understood or civilized.

The Western production of knowledge about the Orient positions Western intellectual traditions as superior, constructing a binary opposition where the West is rational, progressive, and civilized, while the East is stagnant, irrational, and undeveloped. This knowledge production justifies imperial domination as Western societies assert control over how the East is viewed and understood. Orientalism, thus, serves both as a framework of dominance and as a system of intellectual imperialism.

Said's analysis is deeply relevant in understanding the global academic landscape, especially in countries like Türkiye, where the influence of Western academic models is profoundly felt. His critique of the power dynamics in knowledge production offers a theoretical foundation for examining how Western education continues to be privileged in non-Western academic settings. Building on Said's critique, scholars like Mignolo (2002) have further explored the geopolitics of knowledge, emphasizing how colonial power relations continue to shape global academic practices. Mignolo argues that knowledge produced in the West is often viewed as universal, while knowledge from non-Western contexts is marginalized. This concept of the "colonial difference" helps explain why Western-educated scholars in Türkiye enjoy privileges over their locally trained peers. Despite opposing orientalist claims in regard to African universities, Adriansen and Madsen (2019) highlight the persistence of colonial structures in international academic collaborations where Western institutions often dominate capacity-building projects in African higher education. Similar dynamics are evident in Turkish academia, where Western-educated scholars are valued more highly, reinforcing a colonial hierarchy within academic institutions. The global university rankings system also perpetuates these inequalities, as it is heavily skewed towards Western standards of academic excellence (Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti, 2017).

In the context of Turkish higher education, I argue that Orientalism plays out in the privileging of Western-trained academics over locally educated scholars. Türkiye's modern history, marked by Westernization efforts and a strong focus on European models of modernization (Zürcher, 2017), has long positioned Western academic credentials as more prestigious than local ones (Gerhards, Hans, and Drewski, 2018; Waters, 2006). This reflects Said's argument that the West controls systems of knowledge production and sets standards of intellectual legitimacy (Said, 1978).

Based on my primary observations from Turkish universities as well as the Americans, Orientalism's impact is visible in the intellectual hierarchy within Turkish universities, where Western-educated academics—whether Turkish or foreign—are often seen as more capable or knowledgeable than their locally trained peers. The desire of Turkish universities to internationalize and gain recognition in global university rankings further reinforces this dynamic (Aydinli & Mathews, 2021; Seggie & Çalikoğlu, 2023). Global rankings, which often use Western-centric metrics, contribute to a system where the West continues to dominate global knowledge production (Altbach, 2012).

As Said's theory suggests, the West, by controlling the standards of knowledge, continues to exert influence over how non-Western countries like Türkiye perceive and structure their own academic institutions. The prestige of Western education perpetuates a system in which local knowledge and traditions are often marginalized unless they conform to Western standards. Western-educated Turkish academics occupy a unique space within this Orientalist framework. While they are treated with respect due to their Western credentials, they also face a form of intellectual alienation as they navigate between Western academic norms and Turkish cultural and institutional expectations (Seggie & Çalikoğlu, 2023). Their status as Western-trained scholars gives them a certain authority, but it also reinforces Said's Orientalist notion that intellectual legitimacy is tied to Western validation.

Global university rankings serve as another manifestation of Orientalism in higher education. These rankings, which are often developed by Western organizations or use Western criteria, reinforce the idea that Western academic standards are universal and superior (Hazelkorn, 2017). Turkish universities, in their efforts to improve their global standing, frequently adopt these Western standards, including placing greater value on Western-trained faculty (Seggie & Çalikoğlu, 2023). This dynamic mirrors Said's critique of Orientalism, where non-Western societies are judged by Western-defined metrics of success and intellectual value. By prioritizing the hiring of Western-educated academics and encouraging research that aligns with Western academic norms, Turkish universities contribute to the continued dominance of Western knowledge production. This reflects a form of intellectual imperialism, where local academic traditions are overshadowed by the perceived superiority of Western education.

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism provides a critical framework for understanding the privileging of Western-trained academics in Turkish higher education. This privileging reflects the broader post-colonial power structures that continue to shape global knowledge production (Adriansen & Madsen, 2019; Gerhard, Hans, and Drewski, 2018; Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti, 2017; Mignolo, 2002; Waters, 2006). The treatment of Western-educated academics, whether Turkish or foreign, highlights the persistence of Orientalist thinking in Turkish universities. These academics are often valued for their Western credentials rather than their intrinsic expertise, reinforcing the idea that intellectual legitimacy is still tied to Western validation. Through this lens, we see how post-colonial legacies continue to influence academic mobility, professional hierarchies, and the global flow of knowledge in the modern world.

3. Privileging Western Ph.D. Holders in Turkish Academia

The privileging of Ph.D. holders from Western universities in Turkish academia can be seen as a continuation of Orientalist patterns. According to Edward Said, Orientalism reinforces a sense of superiority in the West by constructing the East as culturally and intellectually inferior. This notion of intellectual superiority is evident in Turkish universities' hiring practices, where Western-trained faculty are often seen as more capable and prestigious than their locally trained counterparts. Altbach (2007) points out that the dominance of English as the global language of academia plays a significant role in this dynamic. Scholars with Western education, particularly from English-speaking countries, are better equipped to publish in top-tier English-language journals, which are often seen as the gold standard of academic achievement. This places them in an advantageous position when applying for academic roles in Türkiye, where universities are under increasing pressure to improve their global rankings.

The privileging of Ph.D. holders from Western universities in Turkish academia can be understood within the broader context of the global academic system, which is deeply influenced by Western standards and institutions. The dominance of English as the language of scholarly communication, the concentration of prestigious journals and publishing houses in the West, and the global university ranking systems all contribute to the valorization of Western academic institutions (Altbach, 2012). In this context, scholars who have trained at top-tier universities in the United States or Europe are seen as being better equipped to

publish in high-impact journals, secure international funding, and engage with global scholarly debates (Altbach, 2007). This assumption is particularly prevalent in Turkish universities, which are increasingly under pressure to improve their global rankings and enhance their international reputations (Akar, 2010).

This hierarchy is particularly prominent in universities modeled after American or European systems. Istanbul, a metropolitan city stretching between Europe and Asia, leads the academic fashion that serves as a role model for the rest of the country (Üsdiken, 2004). As Inelmen, Selekler-Goksen, and Yildirim-Öktem (2017, 1147) addressed in their quantitative analysis that “academics in Istanbul are more likely to have received their Ph.Ds. from Anglo-Saxon and Continental European countries than academics in other cities.” Same conclusions were highlighted by Üsdiken and Wasti’s (2009) study of academic management literature in Türkiye between the years 1970 to 1999. In their peripheral positioning of Turkish Academia in regard to the centrality of US Academia, they stated that a sizeable percentage of faculties in Turkish universities earned their Ph. D.s in the US and projected the centrality of Western knowledge.

Üsdiken and Wasti’s (2009) study ties into the broader discourse on post-colonialism and coloniality of knowledge, where peripheral academic systems rely on the intellectual production of the "core" (Western) countries. Turkish academia, in this context, has largely been passive in producing original knowledge, adopting a dependent role in the global academic hierarchy. Such practices not only marginalize locally trained scholars but also create a sense of intellectual dependency on Western academic institutions, echoing Said's critique of Orientalism as a tool of cultural domination.

A persistent pattern for such a colonial legacy could also be linked to the university ranking indexes. Global university rankings, which are largely shaped by Western academic norms, play a crucial role in determining the prestige of institutions and their faculty. Hazelkorn (2017) points out that these rankings prioritize criteria like research output in English, international collaborations, and Western-style credentials, all of which favor faculty with Western academic backgrounds. Shahjahan, Blanco Ramirez, and Andreotti (2017) further explore the colonial dimensions of global university rankings, arguing that the rankings

system perpetuates global inequalities by valuing Western models of knowledge production over local alternatives.

In Türkiye, the universities seeking to improve their rankings are more likely to recruit faculty with Western Ph.Ds. to meet these expectations. The QS World University Rankings (2023) show that only a few Turkish universities rank in the top 500 globally, and these institutions typically have a high proportion of Western-educated faculty. The emphasis on global rankings reinforces the idea that Western-educated scholars are more capable of producing research that aligns with these standards, perpetuating the Orientalist view that Western knowledge is superior.

Hazelkorn (2017) discusses the impact of global university rankings on higher education, arguing that these rankings often prioritize research output in English-language journals, which disproportionately favors Western-trained academics. Turkish universities, eager to improve their global rankings, are incentivized to hire faculty who are familiar with the norms and expectations of the Western academic system, thereby perpetuating the privileging of Western Ph.D. holders. This creates a feedback loop where the hiring of Western-trained scholars leads to higher rankings, which in turn reinforces the belief that Western education is superior.

In the context of world rankings, globalization has significantly reshaped the landscape of higher education, especially in developing countries like Türkiye. Akar (2010) highlights that globalization presents both opportunities and challenges for Turkish universities. On the one hand, internationalization facilitates cross-cultural academic exchange and opens up new avenues for research collaboration. On the other hand, it also creates a competitive environment in which universities must conform to global standards to remain relevant. This often means adopting Western models of education and hiring faculty with Western credentials.

The dominance of English as the global academic language further exacerbates the privileging of Western Ph.D. holders in Turkish academia. Altbach (2007) argues that English has become the "imperial tongue" of academia, shaping the ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Scholars who have been trained in English-speaking countries are often more proficient in publishing in high-impact journals, which are predominantly in English.

This linguistic capital gives them a significant advantage over locally trained scholars, who may struggle to publish in English due to language barriers. As Turkish universities increasingly measure success through international research output and publications, Western-trained faculty are seen as more capable of contributing to these metrics. This not only marginalizes local scholars but also reinforces the perception that academic excellence is inherently tied to Western educational models and the ability to operate within the English-language academic system.

4. Egoism: A byproduct of Elitism?

Egoism among Western-trained faculty members plays a significant role in perpetuating the academic hierarchy in Turkish universities. Egoism and elitism often lead to the exclusion of less prestigious scholars. In the context of Turkish academia, Western-educated faculty members may consciously or unconsciously engage in practices that marginalize their locally trained colleagues. This exclusion can take various forms, including limiting access to research opportunities, leadership roles, and decision-making processes. Such practices mirror Said's critique of Orientalism, where the "superior" West asserts its dominance by marginalizing the "inferior" East.

Egoism also manifests in the way Western-trained faculty members view themselves within the Turkish academic system. Many return to Türkiye with a sense of superiority, believing that their Western education grants them greater intellectual authority. This elitism can lead to a lack of collaboration with locally trained scholars, further entrenching the academic hierarchy and reinforcing the Orientalist notion of Western dominance. This dynamic creates a form of intellectual dependency wherein Turkish universities become reliant on Western-trained scholars to meet international standards and improve their global rankings. This sense of superiority can manifest in various forms of exclusionary practices, including the monopolization of academic leadership roles. Egoism among Western-educated faculty also plays a role in shaping academic identity and discourse. Scholars with Western Ph. D.s may view themselves as the bearers of "modern" and "universal" knowledge, dismissing the work of locally trained scholars as parochial or less rigorous.

As a Ph.D. holder from a non-Western country, my integration into the academic community at a reputable U.S. state university has been marked in contrast to my above observations by genuine inclusivity and openness. Surrounded by colleagues who hold degrees from prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Stanford, I expected that implicit hierarchies might shape our interactions. However, I quickly discovered that within this circle, our academic backgrounds—Western or otherwise—do not define our standing. We are treated as equal contributors, each valued for our unique insights and experiences.

In both on-campus and off-campus gatherings, my colleagues have shown a notable enthusiasm for non-Western perspectives. Conversations often delve into the diverse ways knowledge is constructed and interpreted across cultures, and my U.S.-trained peers openly acknowledge the limitations of a solely Western view. Many of them display a reflective awareness of what Edward Said identified as the "Orientalist" framework in Western scholarship. Far from reinforcing such dynamics, my colleagues actively challenge them, seeking to engage deeply with ideas from outside the Western canon. This openness suggests a gradual but significant shift within parts of Western academia, where there is a willingness not only to hear but also to learn from non-Western voices, reshaping the contours of academic discourse toward a more genuinely global and equitable exchange.

In contrast to the inclusive atmosphere I have experienced in U.S. academia, the dynamics within Turkish academia reveal a different picture when it comes to valuing diverse perspectives and educational backgrounds. In Türkiye, there exists a visible hierarchy that often places Western-trained academics, particularly those with degrees from institutions in the U.S. or Europe, at the top. This phenomenon aligns with a form of academic Orientalism, where degrees from Western institutions are seen as a marker of superior knowledge and competence. Such practices reflect the broader influence of Western academic norms on Turkish higher education, where having a Western Ph.D. can sometimes overshadow a scholar's actual contributions or expertise. This prioritization can stifle academic diversity, as non-Western-trained scholars may feel marginalized or pressured to align their research and perspectives with Western frameworks to gain recognition.

The disparity becomes even more evident in informal settings. While U.S. colleagues openly encourage non-Western viewpoints, Turkish academia, influenced by this hierarchical structure, may inadvertently discourage alternative perspectives from those educated locally.

In this context, the knowledge of Turkish scholars with Western degrees is often perceived as more “universal” or “objective,” overshadowing localized, culturally rooted understandings. This system not only perpetuates a post-colonial academic bias within Türkiye but also limits the potential for a truly pluralistic academic environment that values diverse epistemologies. The Turkish academic system, thus, contrasts sharply with my experience in the U.S., where the emphasis is on dismantling rather than reinforcing hierarchical and Orientalist structures.

5. Conclusion: Toward a Decolonized Academic Landscape

The privileging of Western-educated Ph.D. holders in Turkish academia reflects a broader Orientalist dynamic in which the West is seen as the center of intellectual authority. This hierarchy, driven by globalization, the dominance of English, and the pressures of international rankings, marginalizes local scholars and reinforces intellectual dependency on Western academic institutions.

To combat these challenges, Turkish universities need to develop policies that promote a more inclusive academic environment, one that values diverse educational experiences and fosters collaboration between local and Western-trained scholars. A more balanced approach to internationalization would allow Turkish academia to engage with global research networks while maintaining and promoting its own intellectual traditions. This decolonization of Turkish academia would help dismantle the Orientalist power structures that currently shape the academic hierarchy and create a more equitable academic landscape.

Atatürk’s Westernization project, which included adopting the Latin alphabet, secularizing education, and fostering scientific and intellectual engagement with Europe, established the foundations of a modern Turkish intellectual class that viewed the West as the source of advanced knowledge (Zürcher, 2017). This created an intellectual environment in which scholars who had trained in Europe or, later, in the United States were seen as embodying “progress” and modernity. These Western-trained scholars became instrumental in shaping the Turkish university system, which subsequently began to view local academic traditions with suspicion if not outright disdain. This intellectual dependency on the West laid the groundwork for the current academic dynamics in Türkiye, where Western Ph.D. holders are often favored in hiring and promotion decisions.

Observing the academic life in the US and Türkiye, I have noticed that faculty members holding degrees from Western institutions experience faster career advancement. This reflects a structural bias in favor of Western academic qualifications, a phenomenon that has its roots in the global dominance of Western knowledge production and its perceived superiority. This bias reinforces a hierarchical relationship between local and Western-educated scholars, perpetuating an academic culture that implicitly devalues local knowledge production in favor of imported intellectual frameworks.

The privileging of Western Ph.D. holders in Turkish academia is a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in both historical legacies and contemporary global academic structures. This privileging is perpetuated through a combination of institutional mechanisms, discursive practices, and individual egoism, all of which contribute to the marginalization of locally trained scholars and the devaluation of indigenous intellectual traditions. To address these issues, there is a need for a conscious effort to decolonize Turkish academia, a process that involves recognizing the value of local knowledge and creating more equitable opportunities for scholars trained in Türkiye. This will require not only challenging the hegemony of Western academic standards but also fostering a more inclusive and diverse intellectual environment that encourages the development of independent, critical thought. Only by breaking the cycle of intellectual dependency can Turkish universities fully realize their potential as centers of academic excellence and innovation.

Furthermore, the disproportionate access that Western-educated scholars have to international networks and funding plays a critical role in their privileged status. Faculty members with degrees from the West are seen as better positioned to facilitate these collaborations, further reinforcing their dominance in Turkish academia. By examining these issues through the lens of post-colonialism, particularly the work of Mignolo (2002) and Said (1978), we can see how Turkish academia mirrors global academic hierarchies that privilege the West. Addressing these inequalities requires a critical reevaluation of the value placed on different educational backgrounds and a move toward a more inclusive and equitable academic system.

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